

St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church  
Southwest corner of High and Walulla Streets  
Idaho City  
Boise County  
Idaho

HABS No. ID-12

HABS,  
ID,  
8-IDC1,  
7-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. ID-12

## SAINT JOSEPH'S ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Location: Southwest corner of High and Walulla Streets,  
Idaho City, Boise County, Idaho.

Latitude: 43° 49' 39" Longitude: 115° 49' 47"

Present Owner: Roman Catholic Diocese of Boise, Idaho.

Present Occupant: Idaho City parish.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: The first Catholic church in the Boise Basin and one of the oldest in the state of Idaho, St. Joseph's was dedicated on November 15, 1863, originally to serve the religious needs of the Euro-American Catholics. After avoiding destruction in Idaho City's first major fire of May 18, 1865, it burned to the ground on May 17, 1867. It was rebuilt the following autumn.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: The rebuilding of the church was completed in November 1867.
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: Saint Joseph's stands on Lot 5, Block Q in the townsite of Idaho City Plat of 1915. Reference to the title is in the Deed Books at the Boise County Recorder and Auditor's office, Idaho City, Idaho:

1864 Deed, February 27, 1864, recorded March 5, 1864. Deed Record 3, p. 95. John McGenley to A.Z. Poulin for \$1. "donate into F.N. Blanchett Archbishop of the Catholic diocese of Oregon City... A certain lot on Commercial Street in Idaho City, Boise County, Idaho Territory on which the present Catholic Church is built..."

1865 Deed, April 24, 1865, recorded in Deed Record 5, p. 571. Edward Edwards to A.Z. Poulin for \$200. "Commencing at the North East corner of High and Walulla Streets (the church originally faced north) and running east along the north side of Walulla Street 110 feet thence north 40 feet thence West 110 feet to High Street thence south along East side of High Street to the place of beginning."

- 1866 Deed, August 18, 1866, recorded in Deed Record 7, pp. 160-161. N.F. Heard to Father A.Z. Poulin for \$165, "lot situate on High Street between Commercial and Walulla Streets and said lot fronting on High Street running back to the Catholic Church lot..."
- 1915 Deed, September 21, 1915, recorded in Deed Record 41, p. 41, John H. Myer, Probate Judge, to Rt. Rev. A.J. Glorieux, for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Boise, Lot 5, Block Q.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The church was built by local residents under the supervision of Fathers T. Mesplie and A.Z. Poulin.
  5. Original plan and construction: The rebuilt St. Joseph's faces west toward Main Street; the original building faced north toward Commercial Street. The wood for the frame and exterior siding was probably local, and has always been painted white.
  6. Alterations and additions: The building is remarkably well preserved. In her article "Church Marks 100th Birthday" in the Idaho Register, May 26, 1967, Mickie Gumm of Idaho City catalogued the renovation to the church since 1964:

"Under Father Dodd's direction, many repairs and improvements have been made, with the church still retaining its antiquity. Renovation includes foundation renewal, furnace, steps leading from the road to the church on the hill, re-wiring, carpeting in the sanctuary, built-in confessional, new sacristy cabinets, floor covering in the sacristy, interior painting, wall-papering and, most recently, stained glass windows throughout. The exterior of the church was painted by Boise seminarians in the summer of 1964."

A small, enclosed projecting entry was added to the front facade of the church at an unknown date.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The first of four churches built in the Boise Basin within six months, St. Joseph's was dedicated on November 15, 1863. Its construction was supervised by Fathers T. Mesplie and A.Z. Poulin. The original church looked north onto Commercial Street, and it was a frame building 20' wide, 75' long and 24' high. It had a 12' cross on the roof. The first midnight masses were held on Christmas Eve, 1863 at St. Joseph's in Idaho City and St. Thomas' in Placerville.

On May 18, 1865 Idaho City was devastated by the first of four major fires. Most of the town was destroyed. Through a concentrated effort of the townspeople and its location on East Hill the church was saved. After the fire the church served temporarily as a hospital and shelter.

The church was not as fortunate on May 17, 1867 when Idaho City witnessed its second massive fire. The church burned down with losses estimated at \$8,500. However, Father Mesplie saved "most of the altar ornaments, and fixtures, the vestments, robes..." (Idaho World, June 1, 1867.) Father Poulin had left Idaho City in September 1866 because of poor health. He returned on May 19, 1867 two days after the fire.

Mesplie and Poulin immediately began construction of the new church building; in the meantime services were held in "Brown's brick building." In June a temporary chapel opened on East Hill. The construction was completed in November 1867. The church bell dates from this time.

According to Mickie Gumm, St. Joseph's held the first recorded solemn high mass in Idaho on All Souls Day, November 1, 1868. Bishop Lootens, Idaho's first bishop, preached in Idaho City in February of 1869, which "was the first sermon preached in Idaho by its own bishop." (Idaho Register, May 26, 1967)

Father Mesplie, a Belgian priest who came to America in 1847, arrived in the Boise Basin in June of 1863. Father Poulin, who was born in Montreal, Canada, came to Idaho City in September of that year as St. Joseph's first parish priest. He was an imposing figure in the town. He weighed nearly 300 pounds, carried a cane, wore a large sombrero, and was known for his tenor voice and musical ability. In 1869, he transferred to Silver City, Idaho, and was replaced by the Reverend J.S. Archambault. Archambault, who later became the pastor of St. John's Church in Boise, Idaho, served St. Joseph's until 1877 when Father Adelaar succeeded him. Adelaar was the last official Idaho City priest until the 1960s.

In 1964 Father Perry W. Dodds became the regular pastor of the church. He initiated the restoration work at the time and officiated at the 100th anniversary celebration in 1967. Currently Father Pu conducts services.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: A photocopy of old photo shows a general view of the church, date unknown. Original photo at the Idaho Historical Society, Boise, Idaho. Included in the HABS collection.

A photocopy of old photo shows another general view of the church, taken June 1961. Original photo at Idaho Historical Society, Boise, Idaho. Included in the HABS collection.

2. Bibliography:

- a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deed Books, County Recorder and Auditor's Office,  
Idaho City, Boise County, Idaho.

Interviews: John Brogan, Francis Mohr and Francis Adams,  
in Idaho City, April 10, 1973; Dorine Goertzen  
in Boise, June 4, 1974.

b. Secondary and published sources:

Adams, Francis. Idaho City, Queen of the Gold Camps.  
Idaho City, Idaho: Idaho World, 1953.

Boise News. Newspaper articles, 1863-64. Idaho City, Idaho.

Bradley, Right Reverend Cyprian and Kelly, Most Reverend Edward J.  
History of the Diocese of Boise, 1863-1952, Boise:  
Roman Catholic Diocese of Boise, 1953.

Byrd, Annie Laurie. Boise, the Peace Valley. Caldwell: Caxton, 1934.

Elliott's History of Idaho. San Francisco, 1884;  
reprinted: Fairfield, 1971.

Gumm, Mickie. "Church Marks 100th Birthday."  
Idaho Register, May 26, 1967.

Idaho World. Newspaper articles, 1864-76. Idaho City, Idaho.

Prepared by Alan Minskoff  
Historian  
Historic American  
Buildings Survey  
Summer 1974

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: In 1867, the church was rebuilt after the major Idaho City fire destroyed the original 1863 building. This white frame building is typical of the churches erected in the 19th century frontier towns in the northwest United States. This was the first Catholic Church established in Idaho to serve the Catholics of Euro-American descent.

2. Condition of fabric: Good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The L-shaped church measures approximately 28' x 72' (three-bay front) and is one-story high.

2. Foundation: The foundation is of native stone with concrete additions.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: The walls are covered with a coved top joint and shiplap siding, and they are painted white.
4. Structural system, framing: The building is a wooden frame structure with a wooden truss system and metal tie rods over the nave.
5. Entry: There is a small enclosed, projecting entry on the west (front) side of the church, which is an addition.
6. Chimney: A concrete block chimney on the south side of the church has replaced a brick chimney.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: A single arched panel door is on the front projecting entry. A panel door with nine lights is the exit door from the projecting wing of the building on the south side. There is a storage shed board and batten door on the rear (east) side of the building.
  - b. Windows and shutters: There are three fixed windows in the front (west) wall, of which each have eight lights. There is a two-over-two double hung sash window with a single board and batten shutter on the north side. There are two windows in the wing on the south side, one is a fixed window with eight lights, and the other is a two-over-two double hung sash window. There is a small opening in the north wall of the rear shed.
8. Roof:
  - a. Shape, covering: There is a steep gable roof over the entire church. A smaller gable roof is over the front projecting entry. Both the storage room on the east side and the wing on the south side have shed roofs. The roof covering is corrugated metal.
  - b. Cornice: The cornice is of simple design. There is a cornice return in the front gable end of the church.
  - c. Belfry: The belfry is located at the peak of the gable roof at the west end of the nave roof. It is of simple design with a hipped roof topped with a simple cross painted white.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plan: Entrance to the church is through the projecting west side entry which leads directly into the nave. To the left of the narthex is a choir and organ platform. The altar is at east end of the nave, and at the southeast corner of the nave are the access doors to the confessional booths and clerical robing area in one space, and the kitchen area located in the extreme southeast corner of the church. A door from the kitchen leads into the storage shed.

2. Flooring: There is a pine floor throughout the church with carpet runners in the nave aisle, carpeted altar area, and asphalt tile floor coverings in the kitchen and confessional clerical robing area. The storage shed has a dirt floor.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls in the nave are wallpaper over muslin on rough shiplap siding. The ceilings in the nave are tongue-and-groove boards.
4. Doors: The doors are paneled wood with simple wooden trim.
5. Decorative features and trim: The nave has wooden trim at the top of the wall where the ceiling begins to arch. The narthex contains an ornate organ.
6. Hardware: The original hardware is the surface mounted lockset type with glass knobs.
7. Mechanical equipment:
  - a. Heating: This building is heated with an oil burning, forced air furnace which replaced the original wood burning stoves.
  - b. Lighting: There is incandescent lighting throughout this building.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church faces west which is approached by steps with several landings. The church building commands a city view from the east hill in the community. A parking area has been constructed on the north side of the church.

Prepared by William B. McCroskey  
Project Director  
Historic American  
Buildings Survey  
Summer 1974

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Idaho City project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), in cooperation with the Idaho Bicentennial Commission in the summer of 1974. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed by William B. McCroskey (University of Idaho), the project director; Alan Minskoff (University of Chicago), the project historian; Jack W. Schafer (University of Cincinnati), the project foreman, and the student assistant architects, Rae F. Noritake (University of Idaho), and Laurence Ferar (University of Oregon), and Mark T. Wellen (Texas Tech University). William Klein, a HABS staff architect in the Washington Office, edited the drawings in 1975. The written architectural and historical data was edited in April 1980 by Susan McCown, a HABS historian in the Washington office. The documentary photographs were made by Duane Garrett in 1976.